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Damning evidence from Meese files

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There is more than one way to cover up a political crime. Richard Nixon, faced with the mounting evidence of Watergate, stonewalled for 26 months. Ronald Reagan, amidst a scandal dubbed "debategate," potentially just as damaging, has so far gotten away with a technique that might be called the armored sieve: the administration has released or admitted to masses of largely irrelevant detail; the larger and more damaging implications of the case have been neatly sidestepped.

The case stems from the 1980 campaign, in which Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan met for a televised debate. In it, Reagan came across as poised and very well-prepared, while Carter looked stupid. The reason, it now appears, is that members of Reagan's campaign staff, possibly aided by CIA personnel, stole the Carter briefing book prepared specifically for the debate and used it to prepare Reagan for the confrontation.

The plot did not go wholly undetected. Various Reagan staffers boasted at the time of their vastly successful "dirty trick." Although several small newspapers noted the story, the major media ignored it. In June, 1983, Laurence Barrett published "Gambling With History," which discussed the plot. Larger newspapers then noted the story and raised the question of whether the post-Watergate Ethics in Government Act had been violated. As a result of this publicity, two investigations were launched—one of them by the House Subcommittee on Human Resources, charged with overseeing the act, the other by the Justice Department.

Last week, the House Subcommittee on Human Resources finally issued its report, which found that a crime had, indeed, been committed. The report directly contradicts last February's Justice Department report on its own investigation, which found "no specific, credible evidence of a federal crime."

In the interim, of course, most of the major figures in the scandal have gone on to high offices in the Reagan administration. Edwin Meese, White House chief of staff, is awaiting confirmation as attorney general, to replace current incumbent William French Smith.

At the same time, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled May 14 as a result of a public interest lawsuit that a crime had probably been committed. The judge noted that the Justice Department had not investigated adequately and called on the government to appoint a special prosecutor to look into the case. The current attorney general has appealed for a stay of judgement, evidently hoping to put the whole mess on ice until after the upcoming elections. Meanwhile, the White House sticks to its 12-month-old position, admitting that it had the Carter briefing material but professing

ignorance of how it was obtained and insisting that the material had been of little use.

Examination of the actual evidence in the 165-page report of the House Subcommittee on Human Resources, plus 2250 pages of accompanying exhibits, indicates something very different. Although the report's conclusions are disorganized and haphazard, the evidence itself points to some of the most powerful men in the Reagan administration. The report is, at the moment, the best outline available of the extent of the conspiracy.

Copies of the stolen briefing book itself were found in the files of former Reagan aides David Gergen and Francis Hodson. The committee also found copies of at least five other confidential Carter campaign documents in Reagan campaign archives deposited in a Stanford University library. Two of these papers come from files belonging to William Casey, Reagan's former campaign manager who now heads the CIA. The other three come from the files of Edwin Meese. Both Casey and Meese deny knowing how the documents got into their files, and the committee decided against holding hearings to resolve such discrepancies in testimony.

Some campaign workers also gossiped boastfully about their anti-Carter coup. Among them was Charles Crawford, deputy communications director of the Reagan campaign. More than a week before the Oct. 28 debate, Crawford told his friend Carol Darr that his associates had the briefing book. Darr, a staff attorney in the Carter campaign, tried to warn her campaign chiefs but was told that the theft was impossible and that Crawford must be joking. Darr's testimony was corroborated by her superior, and by a xerox operator who provided an affidavit swearing that he copied some 60 pages of Democratic campaign material in mid-October.

Crawford was not the only Reagan loyalist to let the cat out of the bag. David Stockman, now budget director, gave a luncheon speech in his home state of Michigan just hours before the debate. Stockman told the Cassopolis Optimist Club that he had helped Reagan prepared for the debate using a "pilfered copy of the briefing book [Carter] was going to use." Stockman's remarks were reported in two newspapers, the Elkhart Truth and the Dowagiac Daily News. Stockman, however, insists that his reference to "pilfered" papers was "colorful, not descriptive."

Another Reagan supporter boasting of the stolen briefing papers may have been the person who originally provided the material. Paul Corbin, a free-lance political consultant, told his friend Tim Wytgaard about obtaining the briefing book and handing it over to William Casey two months before the story was

widely publicized in 1983. Although Corbin later denied making the remarks, the subcommittee report notes that Wytgaard, executive director of the House Republican Policy Committee, had no apparent reason to lie about the matter. Perhaps the most suspicious evidence implicating Corbin is money paid to him by the Reagan campaign for no clearly apparent reason. Corbin was given \$1500 on Oct. 24, although he submitted no bill. On Nov. 3 he billed the campaign for \$2860, of which \$1500 had already been paid, "for research reports and telephone expenses." Corbin has sworn he did not provide the Carter papers, but nobody working for the Reagan-Bush campaign can recall just what "research reports" he did provide.

One of the most alarming exhibits in the subcommittee report is not mentioned at all in its analytical section. Angelo Codevilla, a former Naval Intelligence officer who now works for the Senate Intelligence Committee, submitted a draft affidavit: "I have heard that active-duty agents of the CIA worked for the George Bush primary election campaign." Codevilla claims he cannot remember who those persons were, and says he could not mention their names anyway, for fear of revealing their cover names and positions.

If the House subcommittee report remains the best source to date on what actually happened, the appointment of a special prosecutor remains the only avenue for punishing those involved in the conspiracy, given the Justice Department's unwillingness to implicate top administration officials. A suit that would force the attorney general to call for a special prosecutor, as required under the Ethics in Government Act, has been inching its way through the federal courts since last summer.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia will hear the Justice Department's appeal of a lower court's previous decision June 20. Judge Harold Greene ordered the appointment of the special prosecutor May 14, but the appeals court has postponed any action until it has reviewed the case.

A special prosecutor, even if appointed, will be unlikely to complete any investigation before the November election. But if the evidence already revealed turns out—as is likely—to be only a portion of the truth, the top officials of the Reagan administration may wind up spending the next four years keeping themselves and their buddies out of jail.